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THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE SOUTH IN LITERATURE.

THOSE persons who proclaim that literature has but meager opportunities in the South because the South is too much absorbed in her new industrial life are usually those who do not know what literature is or what the literary life implies. Such persons look upon literature as a mere diversion, savoring more of artifice than of art, more of sentimentality than of sentiment. They think of the literary life as one of leisure, and of self-indulgence; and the genus poet comprises, in their minds, chiefly long-haired men and short-haired women.

It is true that the South has entered upon her period of industrialism, this period dating from about the year 1870. Statistics show that at that time the South began a career of unparalleled material prosperity. She began to lead a new life, not so picturesque or princely as the old ante-bellum life, but, as Mr. Grady well says, a more strenuous life, a broader and a better life.

Now it is a significant fact that the new movement in Southern literature dates also from 1870. The coincidence is not accidental; it is a confirmation of the truth that literature is the expression of life, and that there is no antagonism, therefore, between industrial activity and literary activity.

But an impartial study of the present industrial and economic conditions of the South, with the rich promise that they enfold, leads to the conclusion that greater literary triumphs are yet in store. Maurice Thompson well expresses the changed attitude when he speaks of

The South whose gaze is cast
No more upon the past,
But whose bright eyes the skies of promise sweep,
Whose feet in paths of progress swiftly leap,
And whose fresh thoughts like cheerful rivers run
Through odorous ways to meet the morning sun.

Something akin to this hopefulness, this glint of the morn-

ing sun, to which Mr. Thompson alludes, has been the precursor of every great literary movement. The Elizabethan age was great in letters because it was great in life. England, like the South of to-day, was waking to new possibilities, not only in her intellectual and religious life but in her social, commercial, and industrial life as well. The great dramatists of Elizabeth's reign did not create the imperial energy of that age; they reflected it, and thus stored its potentialities. They were the reservoirs, not the fountains. New opportunities had opened new vistas, and literary greatness went hand in hand with national prosperity.

When Shakspeare speaks of

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
This blessed plot, this realm, this England,

he is but the mouthpiece of a people conscious that old things have passed away, and that a new era is dawning. And it is no idle fancy that detects a kindred spirit in Mr. Thompson's lines and those of the great Elizabethan. Do they not both breathe the new spirit of a new age? And when Shakspeare wrote those lines, Elizabethan literature was only on the threshold of a yet greater splendor.

Much has been written of late to explain the literary unproductiveness of the Old South; for it is useless to deny that before the war the literary productions of the South, those of them that bid fair to hold a permanent place in American literature, were few and brief. In oratory and statesmanship the Old South challenges comparison with any section of our country, but her purely literary output did not attain national, far less international, recognition; it was, as a whole, provincial.

Northern critics, and many Southern critics as well, attribute this literary dearth to the evil influence of slavery. Did the reader ever hear of the fate that in 1831 overtook the first locomotive ever used in the South? It was purchased for a South Carolina road, but was wrecked after one year of service, because a darky, not liking the sound of the escaping steam, sat down on the safety-valve. And so our

Northern friends to-day insist that they can see a darky sitting over the safety-valve of every unsuccessful enterprise that the South engaged in before the day of emancipation.

The real cause of the comparative dearth of literature in the Old South lies deeper. We must go back to that most wonderful period in the history of our century, the ten years lying between 1830 and 1840. Few students of history will deny that those years have been the most momentous of modern times. That decade is the cradle of the new or industrial epoch, for it witnessed the first successful application of steam to transatlantic navigation and to railroading, and also the first successful use of electricity in telegraphic communication. In that decade civilization turned over a new leaf. Men came closer together. A forward step was taken toward that golden age sung by Burns,

When man to man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

Conservative old England, finding herself in an age of broadening industrialism and democracy, caught step with the march of progress; and before the first five years of the decade were gone she had emancipated all her slaves, and given the right of suffrage to her sturdy yeomanry.

It was just then that English literature, catching the inspiration of the hour and reflecting the renascent energies that surged about it, woke to a new life. That decade witnessed the rise of Tennyson, the two Brownings, Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, and Thackeray, each reflecting or interpreting the new movement in his own way. Where, then, is the antagonism between industrialism and literature?

We find Tennyson, in the first "Locksley Hall," celebrating in the same breath the triumphs of invention and the universal reign of democracy. And our own country, where the problem of democracy was being worked out on an unexampled scale, was not slow to catch the new inspiration. Previous to 1830 even New England had no literature, but before the decade closed she was represented by Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Emerson, Hawthorne, and

Holmes—the six names that have given the New England States their incontestable supremacy in American literature.

But why did not the South respond to this great literary and industrial movement? Because her intellectual energies were being more and more absorbed in defense of her constitutional views and her cherished institutions. The year 1830, that ushered in the great decade of opportunity to others, witnessed the memorable debate between Robert Y. Hayne, of South Carolina, and Daniel Webster—the most significant contest that the Senate of the United States has ever seen. It was the opening cannon of a struggle that was to end only on the field of Appomattox. Sectional lines began to be drawn closer and closer. The abolitionists redoubled their efforts. The South was thrown more and more on the defensive. Political ambition took the place of literary ambition, and political ambition was further stimulated by the examples of the illustrious Southern statesmen whose genius had shaped and guided the nation in her formative period.

Thus the South was more and more shut in from outside influences. Her industrial system, based on slave labor, stood as a barrier to the new industrial movement; and the enforced defense of this system, together with the political problems and prejudices that it engendered, threw literature into the background and brought oratory and statesmanship to the front.

It was not, therefore, the debasing influences of slavery that checked the literary movement; it was rather the exactions of slavery, and the insulating influences that flowed from it. Under these influences literature became not an art, but a diversion; not a purpose, but a pastime. Many beautiful thoughts, many daring flights of fancy, Southern literature of ante-bellum days undoubtedly contains; but the student of literature will turn its pages in vain for the slightest breath of the new life and new ideas that were transforming the literature of other nations.

But a change soon came, and the Old South proved that

in her hand the sword was mightier than the pen. Defeated though she was, she has accepted the arbitrament of battle, and, with an acquiescence as beautiful as it is rare, she thanks the God of battles that slavery is no more. She has adjusted herself to the changed conditions, and with the adjustment there has come a broader and more varied life.

The New South inherits the virtues of the Old, for she is the child of the Old. She will listen to no praise, she will accept no honors, that must be bought by repudiation of her past. As she looks toward the future with courage in her heart and confidence on her brow, she yet cherishes above price the record of courage and endurance that the Old South has bequeathed to her.

With new economic ideas, with an ever-increasing development of her natural resources, with a more flexible industrial system, a more rational attitude toward manual labor, and more enlightened methods of public education, there has come a literary inspiration impossible before; and the year 1870 has more than made amends for the year 1830. The words which Sidney Lanier wrote to his wife in 1870 may be taken as reflecting the new energies of the time: "Day by day . . . a thousand vital elements rill through my soul. Day by day the secret deep forces gather which will presently display themselves in bending leaf and waxy petal and in useful fruit and grain."

Hardly were those words written before Irwin Russell opened a new province to American literature by his skilful delineations of negro character. Two years later Maurice Thompson is hailed by Longfellow as "a new and original singer, fresh, joyous, and true." In 1875, Sidney Lanier attains national fame by his poem on "Corn," and the six years of life that remained to him were to be filled with bursts of imperishable song. In 1876 Joel Chandler Harris annexed the province which Irwin Russell had discovered, and "Uncle Remus" quietly assumed a place in the world's literature of humor and folk-lore never filled till then. Two years later Miss Murfree, better known as Charles Egbert Craddock, set all the magazine-readers wondering at the

genius that could find literary material in the illiterate mountaineers of East Tennessee. The decade closed with the appearance in literature of George W. Cable, whose "Grandissimes" is ranked by not a few critics as second only to the "Scarlet Letter."

The next decade witnessed the advent of Thomas Nelson Page, of Virginia, and James Lane Allen, of Kentucky. Mr. Page's "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady" not only presented the relation of master and slave in a new light, but furnished at the same time an exposure of the latent, though perhaps unintentional, injustice of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The historical value, therefore, to the South, of stories like these, to say nothing of their literary charm, cannot be easily overrated. Mr. Allen, in his "Blue-Grass Region of Kentucky," added another state to the Southern literary union, and spread the charm of a storied past over a region that had long ago led Henry Ward Beecher to say: "Hereafter to me the twenty-third Psalm shall read: 'He maketh me to lie down in blue-grass pastures.'"

It is pleasant also to record the cheerfulness with which the great Northern magazines opened their columns to the contributions of Southern writers. They forgot their war prejudices much more quickly than did the politicians; and to-day the literary talent of the South is accorded as ready a hearing in Boston and New York as in any city south of Mason and Dixon's line. In 1888, in the December number of the *Forum*, Judge Albion W. Tourgée, no partial critic of the South, declared that the Northern magazines had become so monopolized by Southern writers that a foreigner, reading the magazine literature of this country, would be forced to the conclusion that the literary center of the United States is to be sought not in Massachusetts or New York, but in the South. What a literary revolution since 1870 does not that remark indicate!

Is it not true that the most noteworthy portion of American literature since 1870 has been contributed by Southern writers? Thomas Carlyle once complained that there are

so many echoes in literature, and so few voices. But this complaint cannot be urged against Southern literature since 1870, for not its least charm lies in its freshness and originality. It is no variation of hackneyed themes; it repeats no twice-told tales. It has thrown open a new field; it has revealed an unsuspected wealth of beauty and suggestiveness; it is the reflection of a life responsive to romance and rich in undeveloped possibilities.

It is an interesting fact in the history of American literature that Longfellow began his career by seeking his poetical themes in the scenery and traditions of foreign lands; but the criticism of Margaret Fuller led him to see that his own country had poetical material as well as Spain and Germany. It was then that Longfellow gave to the world his trilogy of long poems dealing solely with American life; and "Evangeline," "Hiawatha," and the "Courtship of Miles Standish" remain as Longfellow's surest guarantee of immortality. But Southern writers of to-day do not merit the rebuke of Margaret Fuller, for they have found their inspiration and their themes in the life that is near and dear to them. They are not rising into solitary and selfish renown: they are lifting the South with them. They are writing Southern history, because they are describing Southern life.

And what richer material for poet and novelist can be found than that offered by many of the Southern States? The contact of the French and Spanish civilizations, though destined to be casual and temporary, has left a rich deposit of romantic episode that Southern writers are only beginning to appreciate. If Washington Irving could find literary material in the Dutch settlement of New York; if James Fenimore Cooper could win renown even in France, Germany, and Italy by his stories of the northern Indian tribes; if Hawthorne and Whittier could weave the quiet scenery and sober legends of New England into imperishable prose and poetry—what may not Southern writers yet accomplish with the varied and romantic history of their own States? Is it not this Southern background that contributes no little

to the perennial charm of Thackeray's "Virginians" and Longfellow's "Evangeline?"

There is one other advantage possessed by Southern writers which cannot be overlooked in even the most cursory attempt to forecast the future of American literature. It is a truism to say that the war meant far more to the South than to the North. To the North it meant the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery. To the South it meant decimated families, smoking homesteads, and the passing forever of a civilization unique in human history. *But literature loves a lost cause, provided honor be not lost.* Hector, the leader of the defeated Trojans, the warrior slain in defense of his own fireside, is the most princely figure that the Greek Homer has portrayed. The Roman Virgil is proud to trace the lineage of his people not to the victorious Greeks, but to the defeated Trojans. The English poet laureate finds his amplest inspiration not in the victories of his Saxon ancestors over King Arthur, but in the vanquished King Arthur himself. And so it has always been: the brave but unfortunate reap always the richest measure of immortality.

I do not doubt that the strange century that is almost upon us will bring to the South new themes and new inspirations, but for the present Southern literature will continue to be retrospective. Our Walter Scott will have come before our Charles Dickens,

And in his verse shall gleam
The swords that flashed in vain;
And the men who wore the gray shall seem
To be marshaling again.

And then will be taken away forever our reproach: that of having a history unwritten by ourselves and unknown to others, for Southern history will then have been written in the living letters of a nation's song and story.

C. ALPHONSO SMITH.